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File ID	123128
Filename	Chapter 2: Discussing online : what difference does it make?
Version	Final published version (publisher's pdf)

SOURCE (OR PART OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCE):

Type	Dissertation
Title	(In)difference online : the openness of public discussion on immigration
Author	T.A.C. Witschge
Faculty	Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences
Year	2007
Pages	VII, 164

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHIC DETAILS:
http://dare.uva.nl/record/292549

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Chapter 2

Discussing online: What difference does it make?

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explained the notion of public sphere and the role of deliberation in it. With the arrival of the Internet[1] new interest in deliberation has arisen, as its features seem ideal for the type of communication that should take place in the public sphere.[2] Against this unbounded optimism there are equally opposing views, in which the Internet is seen as a medium that excludes, is unequal, and otherwise not suited for democracy.

The features of the Internet have led a number of scholars to examine the extent to which the Internet enables deliberation.[3] Here the focus is on the Internet's potential to open up spaces for public discourse: To what extent does the Internet allow for an open and diverse discussion? In this chapter, I discuss some of the more prevalent claims, both positive and negative; why the Internet is (not) such an ideal space for democratic discussion and what empirical studies into democratic communication online demonstrate. To what extent does the Internet hold potential for open and inclusive debate and what role does difference play in this? Do online discussions allow for inclusion of alternative discourses?

[1] Here, I refer to all Internet technologies that are considered to enable democratic discourse. These include the web (and all its different technologies for discussion), e-mail, USENET and newsgroups. For an overview, see for instance Barnes (2002). In Chapter 3, I will address the specific Internet technology that is examined in this study.

[2] There are many other types of political uses of the Internet, such as online campaigning, online voting, citizen information online, and e-consultation. I will not address these here, but rather will focus on the literature that is related to public sphere theory and deliberation.

[3] See for instance (from 2000 onwards): Ó Baoill, 2000; Dahlberg, 2000; Gastil, 2000; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000; Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Gimmler, 2001; Muhlberger & Shane, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Tanner, 2001; Brants, 2002; Hagemann, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; Price & Cappella, 2002; Savigni, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Tsaliki, 2002; Albrecht, 2003; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Liina Jensen, 2003; Janssen & Kies, 2004; Kiss, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Trénel, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Wiklund, 2005.

2.2 How the Internet fosters openness

The 'Internet's capacity to support a public sphere cannot be judged in terms of intrinsic features' (Bohman, 2004: 132). Whether or not the Internet contains spaces that form or resemble an ideal public sphere depends on the way people use it, as the Internet 'itself does not bring about democratization or openness, but its diffusion does create new openings to struggle for democracy. How these opportunities will be realized depends to a large extent on popular action' (Warschauer, 2003: 183). Even though it is ultimately dependent on its use by people, expectations have been expressed with regard to the Internet's potential for democracy. The features that have led scholars to connect the Internet to, in particular, deliberative democracy include the unbounded space for interaction and the anonymity of this interaction. These features relate to the perceived openness of online space, both in terms of the quantity (the number and types of people participating) and the quality of interactions (in terms of the openness people encounter or experience).

First, the Internet is celebrated for its possibility of many-to-many communication (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001: 17), bridging time and place (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003; Street, 1997: 195), allowing for thousands to be drawn into one discussion (Warschauer, 2003: 25), and for the transmission of large amounts of information (O'Hara, 2002). It is generally seen as 'contributing to new ways of knowing, new strategies for gathering, storing, retrieving, and utilizing information' (Dahlgren, 2004: xv). 'Because of its horizontal, open, and user-friendly nature, the Internet allows for easy access to, and thus greater participation, in the public sphere' (Brants, 2005: 144). With the low (social and economic) costs of publishing, and the ease with which people can find a like-minded audience, this has created great optimism regarding the Internet's potential. Specifically, the speaker role the Internet enables is said to hold new and great opportunities.

Second, the nature of the Internet is seen as enabling not only the participation of *more* people, but also a more *heterogeneous* group. Cyberspace 'is a place where difference is not hard to find' (Dahlberg, 2001). 'The onward rush of electronic communications technology will presumably increase the diversity of available ideas and the speed and ease with which they fly about and compete with each other' (Page, 1996: 124). As O'Hara has stated, 'it is clear reasonable access to opposing views can generally be found' (O'Hara, 2002: 294). The ease with which search engines can be used to find like-minded people is equal to the ease with which one can discover different and disagreeing voices—probably much easier than in offline life.

The Internet thus seems to be an ideal place to locate different views expressed by diverse groups of people. It is seen a perfect space for individuals to expand their horizons, meet (or at least encounter) tens, hundreds or thousands of new people and be confronted with a range of new topics and views. However, do all these different people actually find each other on the Internet or do they seek only the like-minded? A number of empirical studies seem to confirm that people connect to heterogeneous publics. Stromer-Galley (2002; 2003) for instance found that one of the reasons that people participate in online discussions is indeed to find different viewpoints. Schneider (1997), in his study of the online discussion *talk.abortion*, indicated that when diversity is measured by the

introduction of new participants, *talk.abortion* could be considered a diverse arena and a dynamic conversational environment.

Robinson, Neustadtl, and Kestnbaum (2002: 300) examined whether 'Internet use may mean that the American public is becoming less or more diverse politically.' Based on earlier descriptions of Internet users, they expected it to be a space with people 'open' and tolerant to deviant or non-conforming individuals in society. The results of the study showed that Internet users were indeed more supportive of diverse and tolerant points of view than non-users. Wallace (1999: 74) found that disagreement does take place on the Internet. It becomes 'very heated and contentious' even when everyone in the exchange conforms to the group's written and unwritten norms.

Third, interactions can take place anonymously, allowing people to discuss with others without making their identity known. This would both create a more comfortable and a more equal environment for discussion, as status differences are indistinguishable. This could be one of the explanations as to why people seek difference online: In an anonymous setting, fear of isolation, humiliation, harming others, not being liked, disapproval and other reasons traditionally seen as reasons for avoiding politics would be reduced (Witschge, 2004). The actions of those engaged in politics would not be as easily ascribed to them and immediate pressures of others are lessened, since the participant is not physically present. As Wallace (1999: 124-125) has acknowledged, 'when people believe their actions cannot be attributed to them personally, they tend to become less inhibited by social conventions and restraints.' The ability of a group to pressure a 'dissenting' individual is lessened on the Internet and in this way the tendency to conform could weaken. Wallace (1999) summarized a number of empirical studies that find that dissenters indeed feel more liberated to express their views online than offline. This might result from the fact that the 'dissenter would not have to endure raised eyebrows or interruptions by members of the majority, or be made to feel uncomfortable about the failure to agree with the others' (ibid: 82). This could result in a more diverse public sphere, as those that do not feel free to speak offline might do so online.

Fourth, due to anonymity, the Internet is seen as providing the means to overcome inequality in debate. It is praised for its possibility to liberate participants from the social hierarchies and power relations that exist offline. This feature is seen as one of the strongest points of the Internet: 'If computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation' (Gastil, 2000: 359). In a discussion forum, words would carry more weight than socioeconomic position; and where status cues are difficult to detect, stereotyping and prejudice lessen. This would even result in more participation and influence of lower status members. At least racism, ageism, and other kinds of discrimination against outgroups seem 'to be diminishing because the cues to outgroup status are not as obvious' (Wallace, 1999: 99).

2.3 Impediments to openness online

Against these more optimistic claims and findings regarding the Internet's potential to provide space for open public discussion, there are counterclaims and empirical findings suggesting that the Internet is not suited for open public discussion or a place where differences can be aired freely.

The first counterclaim concerns the view that the Internet is the medium of the many, allowing everyone to communicate with everyone at low costs. Even though the Internet is an efficient and cheap means of communication (relative to other audiovisual or print media), concerns regarding exclusion in terms of access remain. Although numerous claims exist as to how the Internet is broadening the representation of all sorts of groups that remain underrepresented in other media, this is not to say that access is unproblematic:

> The centrality of the Internet in many areas of social, economic, and political activity is tantamount to marginality for those without, or with only limited, access to the Internet, as well as for those unable to use it effectively. Thus, it is little wonder that the heralding of the Internet's potential as a means of freedom, productivity, and communication comes hand in hand with the denunciation of 'digital divide' induced by inequality on the Internet (Castells, 2001: 247).

Even though many credit the Internet with the ability to allow citizens to speak up and provide marginalized groups with a possible audience, it is important to acknowledge that access is very problematic for some. In principle, in a deliberative democracy all citizens should have access to the political information spaces and be able to participate in the debates (Couldry, 2003: 11). However, not everyone has access to the Internet, and even if they do, they might not have the cognitive ability and technical skills to participate in online political discourse (see for instance: Bucy, 2000: 60). There may, of course, be different reasons for people not to participate, but what is important is that they have the active choice whether or not to do so.

For this reason, people should at least have the possibility of access, both in terms of economic access to Internet technologies as well as to the technological and social knowledge of how to participate online (Selwyn, 2004). At this time, not all citizens have the opportunity or capacity for effective and meaningful use of the Internet, and therefore the democratic potential of the Internet remains limited. In the Netherlands there are still differences in access between different groups in society even though access is ever increasing. In 2004, the Internet penetration in the Netherlands was as follows: 73 percent of the people had a computer with Internet access at home, including 76 percent of men and 70 percent of women.

The second claim that is challenged is that anonymity is good for online democratic debate. Even though the absence of social cues bodes well for equality in online discussion, a number of empirical studies counter this claim. In theory, participants of online discussions have an equal opportunity to post, and an equal opportunity to be heard. However, in practice this is often not the case. 'Online status is often directly reinforced by the

revelation of offline identities that are (...) readily brought into cyberspace' (Dahlberg, 2001: 15). By abusive postings, monopolization of attention, control of agenda, and style of communication some participants are able to make their voices heard more often than others. Schneider (1997: 85) concluded that participation in *talk.abortion* was not equal at all, but rather 'dramatically unequal.'

Herring (2000) showed that, although more and more women are getting online, research of online interaction does not support the claims of widespread gender anonymity. Users are sometimes not even interested in exploiting the potential for anonymous interaction. The use of one's real name can give more weight to a posting, because it 'lends accountability and a seriousness of purpose to one's words that anonymous messages lack' (Herring, 2000: 2). Even when gender is not being expressed voluntarily, there are differences in methods of expression, for instance in civility and length of message.

Third, although conversations on the Internet feature disagreements, 'virtual communities are often based upon people getting together with similar values, interests, and concerns' (Dahlberg, 2001: 10). Similarly, Wilhelm (1999: 172) found that most participants within a discussion group hold the same views on a political topic or candidate. This finding is congruent with Davis' findings from a study into political discussions online. He concluded that they become 'more than anything a forum of reinforcement' (1999: 162), dominated by like-minded participants who limited the diversity of opinions by not tolerating dissenting views. Dissenters are ignored, with the result that they become frustrated and finally give up and leave the discussion group. Not only are dissenters ignored, there is also a risk of 'vigorous attack and humiliation'; Davis concluded that 'Usenet political discussion tends to favour the loudest and most aggressive individuals' (Davis, 1999: 163).

This puts across the fourth challenge to the perceived potential of the Internet for open discussions: Its features, such as anonymity and the low costs (both social and financial) of online expression, have led people to speculate that the Internet will result in 'fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion (otherwise known as flaming)' (Papacharissi, 2004: 260). The Internet will produce unrestrained and uncontrolled communication which will not benefit democracy, but rather polarize society even further (Sunstein, 2001).

Anonymity and the absence of physical presence—which is argued to be promising for democracy—are thus also seen as hindering a genuine democratic exchange. Barber, Mattson and Peterson (1997) argue that, even though anonymity can help promote safer and open discussions, it is anonymity that undermines the deliberative potential of the Internet, as it seems to cause a 'general lack of civility.' Likewise, Streck (1998) compared the Internet with a 'shouting match' resulting from the lack of sanctions and the power of anonymity and the inability to trace identity. Dahlberg (2001) also stated that flaming is attributed to the liberating effects of computer mediated communication—feeling freer to express oneself as one wishes. Although there are differences in the exact numbers of the frequency of flaming, it is clear that it occurs quite often, and that single flames can easily escalate into *flame wars*.

These counterclaims and findings suggest that the unbounded space for interaction and anonymity impede rather than further the blossoming of difference and inclusion in

public discussions. However, there is a more fundamental critique of anonymity in online spaces.

2.4 Discussing difference in online spaces

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the concerns regarding the inclusion of difference in the public sphere. The criticism against traditional theories of public sphere and deliberation is that they do not allow for genuine difference. It was argued that the main prerequisite for public debate is openness, both with regard to alternative discourses and to the participants that employ them. This involves inclusion of all participants and viewpoints in the debate. Specifically regarding debates on contested issues on which society is, or seems to be, divided, this openness of debate and of discussants towards each other is of major importance. The alternative voices can (but do not necessarily have to) be initially included in the public sphere in the form of counter publics, but at some stage they have to interact with the mainstream public sphere.

In this section, I examine the Internet's ability to include alternative voices and facilitate engagement between discourses. First, I will discuss the ambivalence of anonymity in online spaces. The role of the Internet regarding counter publics is the second point of analysis. This brings me to a conclusion about online openness and engagement, and specifically how these elements inform this study.

2.4.1 Anonymity and difference online

One important and not unproblematic feature of the Internet's potential for democratic communication is anonymity. This would allow communication with others without necessarily exposing one's gender, race, or other physical and identity markers. In Chapter 1, however, I argued that it is undesirable and impossible to have participants in the public sphere bracket their identity, as it suppresses difference and thus excludes the groups that are asked to leave their identity behind. But this is exactly what most arguments for the potential of the Internet with regard to democratic discussion are based on. There are three problems with this 'naive dismissal of the relations of power' (Travers, 2000: 15).

First, the Internet does not necessarily allow for an 'identity free' space, as a number of studies quoted earlier have found. In this respect, 'identity online is still *typed*, still mirrored in oppressive roles even if the body has been left behind or bracketed' (Nakamura, 2002: 4). Moreover, chosen identities facilitated by the technology such as online avatars but also nicknames, pseudonyms and other indicators of identity are not a complete eradication of offline identities but rather involve a shift of these identities into the online or virtual world. Even though the physical bodies of participants are not (necessarily) visible to other users, language and images portrayed online still reveal identity markers (whether shown consciously and in accordance with 'reality' or not). As this language and these images can contain more information about someone's identity (e.g. political affiliation or religion) than mere physical appearance, we have to wonder if online identity is not *less* bracketed than *more*.

The second problem with celebrating anonymity is that when identity is not spelled out online, offline ideologies are reproduced. As argued in the previous chapter, when one specific type of communication is idealised or preferred, specific groups are marginalized. The ideal of one type of expression governing the public sphere excludes other types and, hence, certain participants and viewpoints. Conversely, if these marginalized groups fit this one ideal type, it reproduces and reinforces the mainstream way of interaction. Instead of opening up spaces for difference online, anonymity—when taken to mean suppressing one's identity—reproduces gender, racial, and other relevant stereotypes.

This brings us to the third objection to seeking the Internet's potential for democratic discussion in anonymity: Asking people to leave behind their identity puts them in a difficult position. If anonymity asks the 'other' to remain 'in the closet', if the 'other' has to pretend s/he is something s/he is not, is this then an asset?

> If people do not contest the norms that exclude them, they participate only partially. (...) They are merely 'enjoying' the privilege accorded to some by not contesting the assumptions that their silence means they match the underlying universals of the public sphere (...). As long as the terms of participation remain unchallenged, diversity fails to characterize participation in these spaces (Travers, 2000: 16).

Here we come back to points made earlier in Chapter 1, where the same question was asked: Is the bracketing of identity desirable (if feasible at all)? It was argued that identity will and should inform the manner of expression and the positions presented in political discussion. In the same fashion, we need to question the celebration of the Internet as a democratic place, because social cues are not present on it. This raises the question whether (and why) social cues and identity markers are something that should be left behind. These questions also allow us to be more aware of the way in which identity plays a role in online public discussion. Thus, the empirical question should be directed at uncovering what role difference plays in online discussion and who/what is in/excluded, rather than assuming these types of difference are no longer important online.

If online communication should not be stripped of identity markers but rather, should embrace difference, we need to evaluate such possibilities. Therefore, does the Internet allow for engagement between different discourses better than offline interaction?

2.4.2 Alternative spaces and counter publics online

If it is not desirable to leave one's identity behind, we need to discover whether the Internet enables difference and, if so, how. Instead of assuming that, or studying whether, online communication opens up the possibility of leaving behind our offline identities, it is important to look at whether genuine difference is present and tolerated online.

This requires looking at instances where exclusion takes place, and examining how mechanisms of exclusions work online. Much seems to suggest that oppression of difference online happens in the same way that it does offline: 'the likelihood that "coming out" as "other" would leave one open to marginalization on the bulletin boards and hence that the boards simply reflect power relations in off-line social spaces needs to be taken

seriously' (Travers, 2000: 18). Online, rules of conduct will naturally evolve or be consciously developed as in any other space in which humans interact. These norms can be very exclusive, causing some groups to feel inhibited to reveal their identity.

Bearing in mind these concerns, it may well be that the Internet's main potential for inclusion lies in the creation of separate spheres online, in a way that resembles counter publics discussed in Chapter 1. In such a space people can feel safe and can comfortably speak their mind. The Internet seems to hold a great deal of opportunity for counter publics, in that it provides a platform for marginalized discourses. The opportunities for taking on the speaker role pertain to the whole population that has economic and social access to the Internet, but the advantages are expected to be greatest for those who normally have not been able to take on this role, either in the traditional media or in other areas of the public sphere. It is here that we find the claims regarding the Internet's capability to empower marginalized discourses. Because of the low costs of 'publishing', participation in the public sphere is even attainable for people 'beyond elites in wealthy societies' (Bohman, 2004: 137), and those outside of centre of politics. 'The internet offers them a way not only of communicating with supporters, but also the potential to reach out beyond the "radical ghetto" both directly (disintermediation) and indirectly, through influencing the mass media' (Downey & Fenton, 2003: 198).

The Internet is viewed as a new discursive space that allows groups normally silenced in traditional media to 'voice themselves and thus become visible and make their presence felt' (Mitra, 2004: 493). As groups, institutions, and states do not have to compete for access, it is viewed as a counterweight to traditional media: it 'can be used by anyone, at any time, from any place on the planet' (Karatzogianni, 2004: 46). The flexibility of the Internet is seen as the key feature in overcoming social inequality and provides space to voice different discourses:

> It can contain many different, even contradictory, "virtual communities": racist organisations use the same infrastructure as the members of the Association of Progressive Communications to spread their messages; anarchists share the same browser software as the financial organisations they are trying to destroy; pornography and sites promoting fundamentalists religions both flourish and are often found together in the vanguard of technical developments. (...) [T]heir presence highlights how the Internet, by being open to further modes of communication and interconnection, can offer scope for policy intervention designed to reduce inequalities. (Thomas & Wyatt, 2000: 43)

But even if the Internet offers great opportunities for groups to form coexisting counter publics, the question still needs to be addressed as to how engagement between different discourses comes about online, since this is the ultimate aim of exchange in the public sphere (as argued in Chapter 1).

2.5 Conclusion

Little is known about the actual empirical ways in which people use the Internet to discuss politics. Even though the number of empirical studies is growing, no conclusive answer has been given. There are numerous arguments on how the Internet can open up the debate as well as arguments stating that the Internet is not suited for democratic discussion. However, neither *the* Internet, nor the specific technologies it brings forth, inherently produces any type of communication. First of all, there is no such thing as *the* Internet. The literature (both empirical studies and more theoretical publications) reviewed in this chapter often addresses *the* Internet's potential for democracy. But the Internet is often taken to mean different things, such as newsgroups, web forums, chat rooms, or e-mailing lists. All of these types of communication have different characteristics and thus vary in their potential for democratic discussion. Second, though these diverse types of online communication may allow for certain types of interaction that to some extent meet the criteria of democratic debate, it is the user who has to employ the Internet for that purpose and in these specific ways.

The third problem in this body of literature concerns the assumption that because of its anonymity, online discussion offers space for difference. However, if one aims for engagement between different discourses, difference should be embraced and not bracketed or suppressed. Difference should be out in the open to create mutual understanding of various positions and experiences. The question thus becomes to what extent the Internet allows for openness towards and engagement between different discourses. Little is known about this issue, and it is the empirical focus of this thesis.

Keeping in mind the concerns regarding difference and engagement, this thesis examines various elements of openness in online spaces:

- *Structural openness* (Chapter 4): To what extent do online rules and norms that govern the online interactions foster or prohibit inclusion? Online spaces, like all spaces of human interaction, are guided by certain rules and norms. These rules and norms provide the boundaries of the online spaces and thus structure and limit its openness.
- *Participants' views on openness* (Chapter 5): The question is not so much about what difference the Internet allows for, but rather how people use the Internet. Do they use it to find others that have the same views (communities of like-minded) or do they use it to encounter a diversity of people and positions, or do they seek both? Next to these questions regarding the extent to which openness is sought by participants, I examine whether participants feel that the Internet also provides a space for this openness. Do users feel that the Internet provides more space for diversity than other media do, as the literature seems to suggest?
- *Online openness compared to offline openness* (Chapter 6): It is not only relevant to ask participants whether they feel that the Internet allows for diversity and whether this is more so than with other media, but also to examine whether this is actually the case in debates on contested issues. I thus examine these questions through a case study on a particular debate on immigration. Is it the case that more participants and viewpoints

are included online than in offline media, regarding a contested issue?

– *Openness towards alternative discourses* (Chapter 7): Related questions state whether online users are open to views and positions different from their own, and whether dissenters are included or excluded from the debate. What kinds of interactions take place between disagreeing participants, and do these lead to engagement and understanding or just more polarization? These questions are also examined through a case study of an online debate, examining whether engagement between different discourses is present and how this engagement can come about.